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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the kinds of sentences used by students in sample ETS English Composition Test essays, and a survey of some of the actual weaknesses of these papers (e.g., shifting subjects, use of incorrect idiom, and inaccurate or incorrect word choices or usages) point to real gaps in student writing skills. Elements found in good papers (e.g., effective paragraphing, use of quotation to support a point, use of rhetorical questions, use of illustrations, and effective parallel structures) should provide both goals and methods for strengthening writing proficiency. Some specific teaching techniques for improving composition quality include (1) greater emphasis on the improvement of simple sentences before attempting a mastery of compound or complex forms (2) adoption of the methods of the Christensen Rhetoric Program ("generative rhetoric"), and (3) relating oral usage and the oral approach to writing. (MF)

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ETS'S ENGLISH COMPOSITION TEST

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Because they are written by hundreds of thousands of eleventh and twelfth grade students throughout the United States, the essay answers to Educational Testing Service's English Composition Test represent what is perhaps the best single indicator of the quality of high school writing today. At the same time they provide us with more than just an evaluation of student writing. In effect each essay is a twenty-minute double exposure of the student's ability and the abilities of all English teachers that he has been exposed to over his school years.

As source materials for this article I have used the ninety-six sample essays[1] that served as standard models for evaluation by the several hundred persons who graded the more than 200,000 essay answers to the recent December and March tests. Since these particular papers were carefully selected by testing experts from the thousands of essay papers, graded by a group of highly experienced graders, and then graded again by all the graders present, they are excellent examples of the varied quality of the writing in the essays as a whole. I am also utilizing my experience as a grader at the two five-day grading sessions in December and March.

My concern is with the quality of the writing, or the lack of it, in the essays. Content is important, and, in the final analysis, cannot be ignored; however the lesson that I felt to be of paramount importance is to be found in the gramatical and rhetorical qualities of the writing. Concerning my references to the qualities of the sample papers in this article, I will use the terms lower level and upper level, which will mean, respectively, papers that received grades of 1 and 2, and papers that received grades of 3 and 4 on a 1 through 4 grading scale, in which there is no dead center.

The major point of the lesson to be learned from the composition test is simple and obvious, and yet meaningful, if we believe that teachers of composition can work positively to improve the writing of their students. The point is that there is great variation in quality between the best and the worst student papers and that by examining the weaknesses of the poor papers and the strong points of the better papers, English composition teachers can get some idea of what they have achieved and what remains to be done. After presenting the survey and analysis of the sample test papers that constitutes the lesson, I will deal with possible ways that composition teachers can meet the needs suggested by the lesson. Incidentally, the extent of the variation in the writing abilities of the students was brought home very convincingly to the graders at the December session when, after we had become accustomed to seeing occasional papers containing as few as thirty or forty agonized words, we heard one of the officials read a superb paper that only a genius could have written.

Let us look first at the kinds of sentences used in all the sample essays. One interesting point is that basic sentence errors, such as sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and comma splices, were fewer than one might expect: 40 such errors out of a total of 1137 sentences. Since some of the sentence fragments were valid ones appearing in the better papers, it may be possible that teachers are overrating this kind of error and neglecting more positive ways of improving sentences.

A survey of the relative number of simple, complex, compound and com-

pound-complex sentences shows that, of all the sentences, slightly more were complex (42%) than were simple (40%). Fifteen percent were in the compound, compound-complex category and 3 percent were invalid sentences. In the upper level papers a slightly different proportion prevailed: there were more simple sentences (47%) and fewer complex (41%), and slightly fewer in the compound, compound-complex category. Within this last group, there was a greater proportion of compound-complex (45% of the compound, compound-complex category) in the upper level papers than was true in all the papers, where the percentage was 36. In addition to suggesting that compound-complex sentences are generally better vehicles for effective writing than are compound sentences, these figures indicate that the complex sentence is probably somewhat overrated as a basic type to strive for, to the neglect of the better kinds of simple sentences, at the secondary level. And this point is reinforced somewhat by the fact that a number of the simple sentences in the upper level papers are excellent sentences, better than many of the shorter complex ones, which can be jerky in large, unrelieved numbers. Here is a sample of such a simple sentence: "At least a few times in life, be it in high school, college, or the business world, a person should be judged on his achievement alone, and not in relation to his contemporaries." Perhaps teachers could devote more time to the development of this kind of sentence, which is called simple but actually is not. More will be said about this subject in the latter part of the article.

The weaknesses of the lower level papers are generally what one would expect—illiteracies, inadequacies in length and content, shifts in number, inconsistencies of subjects, and other similar common errors. However certain of the weaknesses stand out, suggesting that attention to them by the teacher might do a great deal for the writer, who is oftentimes moderately competent in most other areas. One such weakness is the use of a shifting, inconsistent subject, a failing so prevalent in some of the poorer papers that the reader begins to suspect that many student's lack of confidence in writing can probably be attributed to this frustrating problem of selecting one subject and sticking to it. In one paper, for instance, the subject shifts from "one" to "you" to "I" to "one" to "he". Another paper has this variation "you," "I," "you," "everybody," 'he," "you," "I." All of us who teach composition are aware of this problem, which can be attributed, in part at least, to differing demands of various teachers over the years. Miss Jones, in the seventh grade, does not allow "you" under any condition. Mr. Miller in the eighth, allows no pronouns as subjects. Mrs. Elbert, in the ninth, insists on the use of "one." It is sad to think that many students, after eleven years of education, cannot overcome this problem. Perhaps if associations (such as VATE), supervisors for English in school systems, and English departments of schools could work out a consistent policy that all teachers would be willing to follow, this could be solved. Perhaps, on the other hand, there are other reasons for the difficulty that still have to be probed and brought into the open.

Closely related to the problem of shifting subjects is the use of incorrect pronouns to refer to antecedents. This weakness can be found in otherwise effective sentences in upper level papers. Here are some examples. "If the youth limit the means by which we try . . . " "Some students do not have the ability to keep up with their classmates. When he sees he is slacking, he becomes annoyed." "From my observation of many forms of competition, (athletic and scholastic), it can leave an individual with a feeling of happiness or misery." "In a person maturing he faces the so called evil of drinking." These last two examples, from poorer papers, illustrate the more serious kinds of difficulty that this weakness can cause. An obvious remedy for this is frequent practice in writing under close supervision, or perhaps old-fashioned drills

in which the student engraves the right form on his mind. One gets the impression, from the last two examples in particular, that writers of such sentences have seldom been made to do any writing under criticism.

Another pervasive weakness, that is found in the upper and lower level papers alike, is the use of incorrect idiom, particularly as it applies to choice of preposition. This sentence from a better paper illustrates the problem: "Parents impose limitations to their progeny." Here is another example from a good sentence ". . . should be based by how well you did in school." One possible reason for this is lack of practice in writing. Another is lack of practice in any kind of formal speaking. Still another is the difficulty of minority groups and foreigners to master English idiom, which lacks system and reason. Obviously television is reducing our students' verbal abilities by making them into listeners rather than writers and speakers. Just how to turn the tide in this instance seems difficult. If an eighteen-year old, formally educated American doesn't understand natural English idiom, the root of the difficulty may go back to his elementary school training. Perhaps this is where more effort must be exerted in the development of literacy.

What some of us have considered a standard form, the use of "were" in the subjunctive condition contrary-to-fact (as in "If I were you"), has become something of a nicety among our student writers today. Only the better writers observe this form; the majority of the writers use "If I was you." An example from one of the upper level papers reveals the kind of problem that can arise in connection with this issue: "If everyone was allowed to participate and the competitive process were dropped, . . ." Evidently our writer remembered, in his twenty-minute race with the clock, that "everyone" takes a singular verb, even though he uses "were" in the second clause. The stronger rule won out in this particular contest.

Inaccurate or incorrect word choices and usages can be attributed to various linguistic weaknesses. Some of the violations are gross, others amusing. Examples are "except" for "accept" (a chronic offender), "caus" for "chaos," "decree" for "degree" "coincide" for "conform," "wheres" for "wears"; the ubiquitous "alot;" "a malfunctioned use of Education," and "Some parents rest everything on school." A number of expressions illustrate different possible influences: "the brink of maturity," "the growing up age group," "doggity dog," for "dog eat dog," "Val de Victorian" for "valedictorian," and a figure of speech with an anatomical flavor, "Competition is one disc in the backbone of society."

A respect for the integrity and purpose of the paragraph was evident in the upper level papers. Better writers used the paragraph in most cases to introduce a point, to relate it to other points in the essay, and to develop it. This was not often the case in the lower level papers, where the lengths of the paragraphs were less even. While 71 percent of the upper level papers were divided into two, three or four paragraphs (reasonable numbers for one page essays) only fifty percent of the lower level papers were so divided. In fact over a quarter of the lower level papers were not divided at all and two of them had seven paragraphs in the space of one page. A fairly standard pattern in a number of the upper level papers was to have three or four paragraphs in this order: a slightly too long introductory one, one or two paragraphs of moderate length, and a short concluding one. This is a satisfactory pattern; its lopsided introduction can be attributed, in part at least, to the twenty minute time limit and the rush to get some solid points on paper.

So far the lesson that we have learned from the English Composition Test seems to be an almost completely negative one. You perhaps wonder if the students did any effective writing at all. The answer to this is yes, although it must be admitted that their number is by no means large.

Students have used several rhetorical devices, in addition to effective paragraphing, to enhance the value of their papers. One of these is to provide a crucial definition at the beginning of the paper, such as "Competition is the spiritual and mental strengthener of men." Another device is the use of a quotation to support a point. This effective conclusion includes both the point and its supporting quotation: "I prefer someone who has retained some of the joy and imagination of childhood, without all the limits adulthood places on the imagination. As Peter Pan said, 'If growing up means it would be/Beneath my dignity to climb a tree/I'll never grow up, never grow up, never grow up! Not me! '"

A third device is the rhetorical question. One writer asks, and answers, in one line: "But is this competition necessary? Yes and No." Another places his question at the most strategic of positions in a paper, the end of the first paragraph: "What are these pressures and why has this particular generation revolted against competition as a stimulus to success?"

Two other ways that student writers enhance the value of their papers is by the use of illustration and of short, flat statements to provide contrast. One student supports the need for accepting limitations by this statement, "The idea of suffering as a prerequisite to understanding is a Greek concept;" and then he goes on to use *Agamemnon* and *Oedipus Rex* as examples. Another student uses a different sort of illustration: "To be a mature person one must see the edge of land on his personal horizon." In their use of flat statements students are careful to place them strategically. "This is utterly ridiculous," appears at the end of a paragraph, and these two statements complement each other: "Competition is basic to the human condition. It is instinctive."

A number of students demonstrate facility and grace in their sentences. These sentences show effectiveness of parallel structure: "They have defied laws, they have refused certain inalienable rights, they have rejected the mores of their society." "Such limitations are ones which stop the right to freedom, the right to say what you mean, and the right to protest." "Happiness is being pursued and defeated at the same time. Ulcers and neuroses increase as success becomes less pleasing and more arduous to attain." Sometimes the sentences do not demonstrate any one rhetorical feature. Here are two that are simply excellent: "Then his fancies are shot down one by one, until by the time he is adult, the world is not much more than a bunch of dull facts of life, with a few bright flashes of imagination." "It saddens me to see students struggle through a learning process which they despise, when a more relaxed, thoughtful system would instill them with a love of learning."

There is something paradoxical about the teaching of effective sentences, something that requires patience, and even humility. While the teacher must impose rules to be sure that students will write acceptable sentences, he must not, by these very same rules, discourage the same students from expressing themselves effectively. This student's sentence contains only one error (slowly should be "slow"), yet I am sure that a number of teachers would be inclined to condemn it severely because of the way it begins and ends: "But it should be a gradual change, not extreme or shocking, but slowly enough for society to get used to." Along this same line, I recall how discouraged I was to learn from one of my senior students who was student teaching, that none of her twelfth grade students knew how to use coordinating conjunctions. All that these obviously victimized high school seniors felt safe in doing was to use semicolons between clauses.

The students who wrote effective sentences in these essays have utilized different ways of improving their sentences. There is a variety of sentence openers and "but" is used to begin paragraphs as well as sentences. Incidentally, there are, in the sample papers at least, fewer sentences beginning with dangling modifiers than one would expect, and I do not remember

seeing many in the papers. Perhaps students are avoiding modification at the beginnings of sentences because of the danger of a dangler or because of the time limit of the test. Students have richly improved their sentences by the use of parenthetical elements—from single words to the sort of clause (phrase?) illustrated in this sentence. "Surrounding us are wonders of human achievement, which, had it not been for man's natural desire to compete and advance, might not be true today." Certainly one of the most effective of the sentence elements is the appositive. Students used these to strengthen and enrich their meanings, as these samples show: " . . . individualism, a virtue much respected in the past." "Looking at competition from another side, the human side, I feel . . . " "However, along with competition comes pressure, a parasite which eats away at its host." "We are seeing competition as it really is—a means of losing sight of reality and in the process, our own individuality."

Needless to say, this survey of weaknesses and strong points in the sample essays is somewhat selective. Nothing has been said about shifts in tense or the use of the active and passive voice and of loose and periodic sentences, and of other important indicators of weak and effective writing. However the survey is representative enough to reveal some of the more prevalent weaknesss and strong qualities of high school writing today. The important question now is "What can be done to improve the weaker writers, and the many in-between writers whose presence was only assumed by the survey, up to the level of the better writer and beyond?" In the paragraphs that follow I will offer possible answers to these questions, answers as well as remedies suggested by the nature of the problems and recently proposed by rhetoricians and teachers as new approaches to composition teaching.

First here are some suggestions concerning the improvement of student papers as effective vehicles of expression. The problems in the sample papers indicate that teachers should require their students to incorporate into their papers, systematically and progressively over a period of time, such elements and techniques as a definition near the beginning (when appropriate. of course), rhetorical questions,

appropriate illustrations of different kinds (analogy, allusions, examples, etc), flat statements, quotations, and paragraphs of parallel structure. There are, of course, other elements and techniques that could be included, and there are any number of possible orders that could be followed in their inclusion. But of real importance here is that the elements and techniques be incorporated into students' papers in an intelligent and effective manner and that the incorporation be progressive, so that the papers demonstrate growth in rhetorical stature.

To promote improvement in their students' sentences, teachers should assign exercises involving the inclusion of various parenthetical elements in sentences, such as appositives, participial phrases, prepositional phrases, and adjectives presented as modifying phrases following the nouns modified. Teachers should also require that their students use different sentence openers, and that they use internal transitional expressions, such as "incidentally," and "understandably," in natural, meaningful positions in the sentence. As in the case of the elements and techniques mentioned above, the students' incorporation of parenthetical and transitional elements within the sentences could be done at a gradual pace or at a fairly rapid one, depending on student abilities. The exact elements and order of their incorporation are also flexible in application. In making the suggestions in this and the previous paragraph, I realize that I am probably suggesting what some teachers are doing, and have been doing for years. However it strikes me that if more teachers were doing these things, the sample test papers and sentences would be better—more varied, more

natural, and more expressive than they are at present.

As to the kinds of sentences that should be taught, I suggest a greater emphasis on the improvement of simple sentences, as opposed to promoting the writing of complex and compound sentences. I believe that students who write clumsy sentences, of all kinds, should be forced to write simple sentences that are clear and direct, and that these students should add to their simple sentences progressively by learning and using the various sentence elements described above to make their sentences say more but still be clear and direct. After they have mastered relatively complicated simple sentences and are aware of what various elements can be used to modify the whole sentence as well as the subject and predicate, they should learn how to use subordinate clauses as effective means of modification, how, for instance, to use conjunctive adverbs for various shadings of relationship. Later they will study compound-complex sentences after they have mastered compound ones. In other words, sentence structure should be learned somewhat the way that Paul Roberts' transformational grammar is learned, from the simplest to the most complex, working progressively and adding one new element at a time, not jumping from "simple simple" to "simple complex" and never learning the infinite capabilities of the sophisticated simple sentence.

An interesting new approach in the area of sentence development is the work of Francis Christensen, more particularly his *Christensen Rhetoric Program*,[2] which is designed for classroom use. Christensen's approach, which is sometimes referred to as generative rhetoric, is to demonstrate in the writings of the better modern writers that the best sentences are not the usual complex ones or even the periodic ones, but cumulative ones in which the main point is made at the beginning and everything that follows is modification and development of this main point, a tighter variation of what is traditionally called the loose sentence. Using Hemingway, Van Tilburg Clark, E. B. White, and others, Christensen very convincingly demonstrates the ways in which these writers' better sentences, and paragraphs as well, follow this basic pattern and he goes on to suggest that students model their sentences after these. Christensen contends that if this method is followed, the student will find that his form in his writing will be helping him in the development of his content, a seemingly remarkable feat, which, according to a friend of mine, does work and has worked for him. To illustrate Christensen's cumulative sentence here are sentences taken from upper level sample papers. The first example, a group of three sentences demonstrates the ways that sentences that follow the initial sentence can add effectively to the modification: "It is often frustrating, especially when one tries to achieve goals and another person's ambitions block this striving. But I believe there is a way to lessen the frustrations and anxieties that accompany the maturing process. This is to learn to accept limitations." This second sample is the more typical cumulative sentence in which the modification follows the initial basic clause, but does not give the effect of looseness: "Free thinkers have been replaced by text book spouters who have memorized their opinions rather than thinking and, more importantly, observing for themselves." By urging their students to develop and utilize such sentences as these, teachers can offer them positive help.

Concerning the suggestion, made earlier and based on the survey of sample sentences, that the complex sentence is somewhat overrated as a goal for secondary students, Christensen's program makes the same point by illustrating ways in which sophisticated, effective simple sentences may contain as many as eight to ten sentence elements (appositives, participial phrases, prepositional phrases etc.), none of which is a subordinate clause, and still be labeled a simple sentence. However if just one of these elements is a subordinate clause, the sentence is complex. The effect of this point is that

simple sentences can be complex and complicated yet not be complex officially and that the complex designation is misleading. The point is a worthwhile one and should direct us to look more carefully at the ways that our students can develop good, expressive simple sentences like these samples from upper level student papers: "As a result of the pressures brought about by constant competition with others he loses track of the really imprtant things." "Today, however, with an increase in the demand for skilled, highly educated individuals; with the pressures of a population surpassing in numbers the facilities available to it; competition for recognition, and for the chance to distinguish oneself is trying to say the least." Neither of these contains a subordinate clause. yet the second sentence contains a number of sentence elements.

Mrs. Sabina Thorne Johnson[3] has suggested that Christensen's ideas are stimulating and should be extremely helpful in th teaching of composition. However she feels that he emphasizes the development of only one or two kinds of sentences and neglects others, such as the periodic and balanced sentence. It is not unusual for any particular program to have iimitations. The highly admired Roberts English Series, which has been adopted by numerous school systems in recent years, has received poor reviews on its ninth grade book. The reviewers claim it lacks direction. While Christensen's Rhetoric Program might possibly inhibit brighter students from using a variety of sentence structures, it could stimulate many others to become effective writers. Programs should be adapted to needs within the school and not adopted for indiscriminate use by everyone, because, supposedly, everything that is innovative is automatically good.

Concerning the student weaknesses with language usage and style discussed above, there is a historical reason for problems with English language usage that goes back to the 17th and 18th centuries and beyond. It was during the 18th century in particular that the written language was standardized and a doctrine of correctiveness imposed upon it. At the same time spoken English did not change as appreciably nor was it standardized and corrected. Therefore even today we have two varieties of English—the loose, casual, but often expressive spoken English and the precise, written English that is infinitely more vulnerable to error. For several years now, certain scholars and rhetoricians have been trying to relate these two Englishes so that they complement each other for the writing student.

There are certain distinct advantages to be gained by this relationship, which should be called the oral approach to writing. For one thing, it offers the possibility of helping to reduce at least four student weaknesses mentioned earlier. It seems highly probable that a student's idiomatic use of the language would improve if he sounded out his words before he wrote them down, particularly if his sounding could be subjected to his teacher's criticism. Any sort of controlled and directed oral exercise should do much to improve oral usage, and, if properly applied, written usage. The oral approach should also improve a student's choice of words and aid him in spelling his words correctly. There should, it seems, be less trouble with such problems as the distinction between "accept" and "except" if students speak out under supervision before, and even while, they write. Because the student would be forced to make his subjects consistent and his pronoun antecedents clear in directed oral expression, there is every reason to think that these weaknesses may also be reduced by the oral approach. In my composition course I have found that requiring students to read at least one of their papers aloud to the class forces them to take the sounds that the words make into account when they are writing. I also suggest that they read each of their papers aloud to themselves, and, better yet, that they have someone read their paper aloud to them. By bringing oral and written usage closer

together in composition, it is possible to improve both speaking and writing and to give the student a feeling for the language that he has never had, but will cherish having the rest of his life.

A recent book aimed at relating spoken English to the writing of college freshman papers is John Nist's *Speaking Into Writing: A Guide Book for English Composition*,[4] which should be of interest to the secondary composition teacher. Closer to home, Miss Mary Lovern, assistant supervisor of English in the State Department of Education, presented a position paper in February at the Southeastern Conference on English in the Two-Year College entitled "The Audio Approach to Teaching Composition." In this paper, Miss Lovern describes what is being done in Virginia concerning facilities and programs that support the oral approach to teaching composition. Of particular interest is her description of an experiment at Virginia Beach which allows each student to say his thoughts, play them back, and then compose from them:

> The laboratories are equipped with IBM Executary dictation units for each individual study carrel so that every student can record and listen at once. This system provides flexibility, simple recording and instant playback; is controlled by the students themselves — operating independently of pre-programmed materials; and provides for individual skill growth. Instruction in composition is given to eighth-grade students of all ability levels. The procedure is simple. Students record their thoughts, listen and revise, and finally write. As they listen and write, they also revise and correct noticeable errors.

This program, which has other advantages such as providing a tape recording of the teacher's comments on a paper for the student to hear, offers real possibilities for bringing the written and spoken word together and making our students better writers and speakers.

1 I wish to thank the Educational Testing Service for permission to use these sample papers and to publish this survey.

2 Canfield Press, San Francisco, 1969.

3 "Some Tentative Strictures on Generative Rhetoric," *College English*, XXXXI (November, 1969), 155-165.

4 St. Martin's Press, New York, 1969.